LIBRARIES

Why Books?

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Introduction

Libraries 2000, a seminar to re-examine the function and future development of libraries in Alberta, was held in 1983. A committee consisting of representatives of Alberta Culture, the Alberta Library Board, the Alberta Library Trustees Association, the Library Association of Alberta and the Learning Resources Council of the Alberta Teachers Association was set up to look into ways of following up on the suggestions arising out of the seminar. This is the second booklet commissioned as a result of these discussions.

Public libraries have long attempted to fulfil many functions and roles in our society. As financial and human resources have become harder to obtain, librarians and library trustees have had to give more attention to examining these roles and assessing their relative worth. In recent years, there has been increasing discussion of the public library as an information provider, but less discussion of the more traditional view of library service.

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Why Books?

Information can be given; knowledge must be worked for. Our society has been seduced by the information content of the mass media of entertainment into believing that information and knowledge are the same thing. Reading is often regarded as old fashioned, or, at the very least, an outmoded way of obtaining information. It may well be a poor way to obtain information, but do we need information or do we need knowledge? There is considerable difference between the two as will become clear.

Librarians are accustomed to answering questions. Sometimes these questions are from students looking for information for assignments. At other times they are questions related to work or recreational interests. Important as this service is, it is not as essential as the traditional role of the library in the promotion of the reading of books. The kind of knowledge one gets from reading books is quite different from the information that would answer a reference question. First, let us look at the question "Does reading make a difference?".

The Value of Reading

One way to understand the value of reading is to look at who reads. Many studies of readers show that people who read are, for example, more active in the community than people who do not read.

A 1929 survey of nine hundred adults found that those who read the most were also the most active in social life and club work. A research study of a political campaign in 1945 found that library users were more politically active and more politically alert than non-library users. Bernard Berelson's classic study for the Public Library Inquiry in 1949 found that there was a positive relationship between library use and community leadership. Library users tended to be persons who influenced other people. They were people who helped to form the opinions of their peers. A major British survey of registered library members, published in 1971, also found library users to be opinion and community leaders, more so than were non-library users. Library members were also more active in all leisure activities, indoor and outdoor.

A 1972 summary of European reader surveys found the same thing, concluding that readers were people who sought to influence society.

Two large surveys of reading habits conducted in 1978, long after television was pervasive, had similar results. The research company of Yankelovich, Skelly and White, in a project preliminary to the White House Conference on Libraries, found that those who read books were the most involved in a wide range of leisure activities and community organizations. In Canada, the massive survey of 16,700 individuals, called Survey of Selected Leisure Activities: Reading Habits, found that book readers were more, and often much more, active than non-readers in the case of all activities. In 1979, Michael Madden, an American librarian, analysed a large quantity of data on lifestyles collected by the Lee Burnett Advertising Agency, which happened to include the results of a question about frequency of library use. The results were similar to the other surveys. The activity level, the horizons and aspirations of library users were higher than those of non-users. This mass of survey evidence, over time and in different countries, clearly indicates a relationship between reading and active participation in community development. Having noted that readers differ from non-readers, let us turn to the reason for this difference; an examination of information and knowledge.

Information and Knowledge

If you are given three reasons why Henry VIII had his wives executed, you have information. If you understand why he executed them, given all the personal, social, political and religious values and problems of the time, you have knowledge.

If you know the weather forecast and the price of barley on the market floor, you have information. To be able to use that information to improve profits on the farm, is to have knowledge.

To be told that the government is going to revise the definition of obscenity, is to have information. To understand the political, religious, and social implications from the Conservative, Liberal, New Democrat, Catholic and Protestant points of view, is to have knowledge.

These are examples of knowledge of the world. There is also a knowledge of self. For example, to have vast quantities of data about nuclear weapons is to have information. To know what that information means and how and when to use it, is to have knowledge of a defense system. For a general to be willing to push the button, fully realizing the results of a nuclear war, having considered and reflected upon the issues involved, is to have some knowledge of self.

If you learn that your daughter has decided to live with her boyfriend without getting married, you have information. To decide how to behave toward her, when your own life-long value system has labelled her action as 'living in sin', and then to do what you decide, is to gain knowledge of yourself.

Reading books is a unique way to get knowledge of the world and of yourself. Only in the complexities of explanation possible in sentences, paragraphs, and chapters can a description of the complexities of the world and of people be approached. Only in the slow process of reading words, which involves imagining, reflecting, repeating, and deliberating, can the sustained thought necessary for understanding be achieved. Other media are limited in their ability to deliver complex emotional situations, detailed arguments and thoughts. A motion picture is limited in the amount of physical and emotional detail it can carry, and recorded sound by itself is disembodied. The broadcast media not only does not wait for you to get the message; it often severely edits the message to fit into prescribed periods of time.

In an age that is drowning in information, there is a social and an individual need to have knowledge. Wise decisions do not come from mere facts alone. Data must be interpreted and applied in an historical context and a personal situation, both of which must be to some degree at least, understood. Such understanding can only come from a three-dimensional, intellectual and emotional grasp of a body of knowledge.

As an example of this, consider the incident in October of 1983, when a truck full of explosives crashed through the barriers of the American army headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon. When it detonated, it destroyed the building and killed 241 U.S. soldiers. The commission that investigated the terrorist attack found that the Marine commanders did not suffer from a lack of information. Indeed, it appeared that there was too much information. The problem was that no one was able to analyse and evaluate it. In

other words, they did not understand the information they had. The ability to make judgements in that situation depended on integrating the intelligence information with an understanding of the values and belief systems of the people involved, as well as the larger political picture. The mature mind, developed through broad, free, and careful reading, is the kind of mind needed in such a circumstance.

The Effects of Reading

Many of us have our own stories about how some book influenced us at some point in our lives. The question is, how does reading, in a unique way, help us to make sense of the world, whether our personal world or the wider world around us? Let me suggest some reasons why reading has the effects it does.

1. Because of the peculiar nature of print and grammar, the reader must exercise the muscles of thought and of the imagination just to make meaning out of the abstract shapes of the letters of the alphabet. There is a more intense, more active involvement in reading than in listening or watching pictures. Just to engage in the act of reading places the individual in a position where harder mental work must be done.
2. While we are in the intense mood of the reading process, rather than in the state of drowsiness brought on by television, we are in a more attentive state for learning.
3. Books provide words and concepts that help to describe what is going on in our lives. Naming things and psychological states is a help in understanding them. It helps to control and organize them.
4. Books provide models for behaviour.
5. Books do these things better than other media because they provide a structured, systematic framework with subtleties of detail and emotional nuances that create a closer simulation of life's complexities than can television or film.

6. Reading, as an intellectual activity demanding the use of mental energy, encourages the use of the mind as the dominant mode of coping with the environment.

7. Reading leads to personal growth. When we read we are always engaged in a two-way relationship between the work and our own knowledge. In the process, we are engaged in the act of understanding ourselves. Understanding - coming to understand - is an endless process for human beings. It is a process that creates us anew, usually little by little, but sometimes rapidly and radically.

8. Reading for understanding is an adventure and, like any other adventure, is dangerous. But adventure can lead to discovery - it brings unique opportunities. Reading is capable of contributing in a special way to the broadening of our human experiences, our self-knowledge, and our horizons. Knowledge that comes through reading and understanding is knowledge of ourselves. Readers make meaning by relating their own lives to the meanings of the words they read. Each of us adds a unique personal meaning to the dictionary definition of words, and to the author's use of them. Reading is not merely for 'information retrieval' - getting from the page what the author put there. Readers make themselves as they make meanings in partnership with the author.

Of course, I have not said anything about the reading experience as an experience worth having just for itself. In our eagerness to discover effects and values of reading, to prove its utility, we forget that there may be something valuable and worthwhile in the reading process as such. We do not have an adequate description of that process as an experience which is lived through by an individual.

Nor have I said anything about the value of displaying a wide range of knowledge in book form in one place. Even the smallest public library attempts to cover the range of knowledge. There is an opening up of the mind when one enters a building housing such a free and readily available collection - a perception of intellectual and emotional possibilities. To present such possibilities is a basic principle of librarianship. It is not just being poetic to recite Emily Dickinson's lines:

"There is no Frigate like a book
To take us Lands away."

It is a positive statement about how we get knowledge - a statement about the human mind and the individual's role in society and history.

Libraries and the Information Business

Before taking a closer look at the role of libraries, let us examine the belief that libraries are in the information business. It has been said that if libraries cannot compete with the private sector of the information industry, they will become extinct. I see no evidence to support the hypothesis that libraries are on the verge of extinction. Libraries are busier than ever. Book circulation has shown substantial increases in recent years and educational programmes are expanding.

Some librarians have been panicked by these rumours of extinction and have changed the "reference desk" to the "information service". Others have become excited about new devices such as Telidon, computerized circulation or on-line searching. This response to change is consistent with the librarian's nature. The computer, as a new carrier of information and knowledge will accompany the book, the film, the record and the video cassette down through the coming centuries. We are all suffering through a period of novelty, which includes placing on the back burner of our concerns the traditional role of the library - to promote books and reading or, in other words, to encourage into being a citizenry that is knowledgeable, not merely informed.

While I have not forgotten that librarians also provide information, that is, they answer reference questions; they are not in the information business. Studies in recent years have investigated how well libraries answer reference questions or, as it turned out, how poorly they do it. The test questions in these studies were ordinary, everday questions such as "In what short story does the character John Holden appear?"; "Do blood spots in eggs make them unfit for consumption?"; and "Did Columbus have a magnetic compass for use on this voyage that led to the discovery of America?". The success rate for answering questions of this type ranged from 40% in a 1975 California study to 54% in a 1968 study.

Any business with that track record would soon be out of business. To survive with such a poor showing either a) the business is extremely adept in fooling its customers, b) there is no alternative or c) it is really in some other business which it does extremely well. I suggest that the public library does extremely well at the book circulating business and in encouraging the development of human beings through reading.

The average public library places 85% of its effort into the circulation of books. Librarians have always been good at advising readers about books, at finding books, and talking about them in the context of ideas and knowledge in general. Librarians, library boards and provincial library departments need to realize that the promotion of book reading is the major task of libraries. We need to concentrate on that goal. We are trying to come to grips with our agenda for the future and the crux of the matter seems to be whether libraries are in the information business or are trying to encourage the development of knowledge. We need to affirm the traditional purpose of public libraries; to understand the value of reading so that we will continue to do one thing well and not be sidetracked by the glitter of the information industry.

The Role of the Library

The library's major role is not to provide information. If libraries over-emphasize storing, gathering and dissemination of information we endanger the development of a broader view of life. It is relevant to recall the words of the physicist Werner Heisenberg in his address at the Quincentenary Celebrations of the University of Munich in 1972. Discussing the unrest of university students at that time, he saw that a search for new values would not be found in a rationalistic analysis of social relationships. Indeed, Heisenberg said, the irrational doings of the young in the sixties were probably expressing a longing for a world in which the mind is more than information, love more than sexuality and science more than the collection and analysis of empirical data.

The danger of allowing ourselves to shift our energies to technologies, techniques, and information services, as some would have us do, is that public libraries will become just another information utility. Libraries should be the source of

knowledge that leads to an understanding of all life and especially of individual, personal, human lives - the kind of understanding that gives the necessary distance, depth, and meaning to make judgements for the whole person. Plugging of a temporary information gap is important, but it is not the first goal of the public library.

Conclusion

In an age that Alvin Toffler called 'the blip culture', we suffer from information overload. That is why, for example, we need community information centres to sort out the information we need for the everyday activities of life - those things we used to be able to learn from our neighbours. Not only are we overwhelmed by locally produced information, but we are bombarded by all the information that comes over the broadcast media (it has been said that there are now 2000 television ads a day).

We are distracted from drowning in a sea of relevant information by a mountain of irrelevant data. More than ever before people need a body of knowledge that they are sure of and that they hold securely, even if that knowledge is of such fantasy worlds as we find in **The Lord of the Rings**. In a complex, impersonal, open value society, individuals need islands in the mind from which to gain perspective, to ward off the barrage of bits and bytes, to provide a foundation of understanding that will make sense of the world.

Libraries have always been book-oriented. Even now, as the need for information seems desperate, libraries are book-oriented. The public library is feeling the pressure from those who threaten its end because it will not get into the information business and compete with the private sector. These threats are made by people who have not looked closely at libraries or thought about the unique contribution of the reading experience. The public library does not have any competitors in its primary work - the circulation of books as a social responsiblity.

Getting people to read books is still the major role of the public library. One need only mention those great reading programmes such as The Great Books, or the present American Library Association effort, "Let's Talk About It". The Library of

Congress sponsors ads for books following certain TV programmes. Think also of the many libraries, of all sizes, which have reading programmes for children and adults. Public library adult education programming is also designed to promote reading. In a survey of programmes in twelve large American libraries, it was clear that the prime cultural role was the building of the library's collection and activating that collection into use.

It is essential that we re-emphasize the role of the library as the promoter of book reading. In an age bludgeoned by information, the library is the only freely accessible social institution which can help develop the kind of understanding of the world and of the self that comes form the reading of books. Schools focus on teaching skills and the knowledge needed to survive. The public library is committed to the dream of broadening and deepening the general culture of individuals so that our country will have wise and imaginative citizens.